

Talking Points

Press conference on anti-crime bills

Thursday, January 11, 2007

(Governor gives opening remarks, followed by Senator Ed Morgan, Senator Perry Lee and Rep. Jeff Smith.)

I am pleased to join with these outstanding legislators, prosecutors and law enforcement officers in efforts to curb violent crime and protect public safety.

Building safer communities has been a mission of mine since the beginning of my term as Governor. That should come as no surprise because before I took office state leadership was not focused on stopping the crime epidemic, especially the epidemic caused by drugs.

For example, the Musgrove Administration cut the budget for drug law enforcement by 41%, even though nearly 80% of crime is drug-related.

These bills being introduced in the House and Senate deal with a very specific area of criminal activity, much of which is driven by the tendency of felons to commit new crimes while they are in possession of firearms.

I want to call now on Senator Morgan, then Senator Lee, then Chairman Smith to summarize the bills and make their comments.)

(Summary of bills)

Senate Bill 2470 increases the statutory maximum penalty to up to 10 years for previously convicted felons found in possession of a firearm. The current statutory maximum sentence is up to three years. The Senate sponsor of the bill is Sen. Ed Morgan, R-Hattiesburg, and the House sponsor is Rep. Jeff Smith, D-Columbus, chairman of the House Judiciary B Committee.

Senate Bill 2459 increases statutory penalty to 10 years for previously convicted felon who uses a firearm during the commission of any felony. The 10 year sentence must be consecutive to the underlying felony and can not be reduced or suspended Current statutory sentence for either convicted felon or first offender is five years. The Senate sponsor is Sen. Perry Lee, R-Mendenhall, and the House sponsor is Chairman Smith.

(Governor gives closing remarks)

Thanks to all of you for your leadership on this important initiative.

I might add that the approach outlined here today has earned the support of the National Rifle Association, and all of us appreciate their support.

Increasing the statutory maximum for convicted felons carrying a firearm and using a firearm will give Mississippi prosecutors and law enforcement the tools to efficiently put some of our most dangerous criminals behind bars.

Persons with a prior conviction commit a majority of the violent crimes in America. The Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, found in a 2006 study that 56% of the violent felons convicted in the nation's 75 most populous counties from 1990 through 2002 had a prior conviction record.

All across our state, judicial dockets are overloaded and our prosecutors and law enforcement agents are overworked. Prosecuting convicted felons for carrying firearms requires less law enforcement and judicial resources than prosecuting complex drug or violent crime cases. It protects the people and saves taxpayer money.

To convict a felon of possessing a firearm, a prosecutor only has to prove two things: (1) person was previously convicted for a felony; (2) person had a gun.

Aggressive prosecution of convicted felons carrying firearms can reduce violent crime. For example, in 1997, law enforcement in Richmond, Virginia, the highest crime area in that state, began targeting prosecuting felons in possession of firearms. In the first year of the program, homicides were reduced by 40 percent and armed robberies were reduced by 30 percent. (American Prosecutors Research Institute, An In-Depth Look at Richmond's Project Exile.)

Make no mistake: These are serious, necessary steps for serious times.

We're giving law enforcement officers more tools to fight crime and putting criminals behind bars.

I look forward to the day when I can sign these new tools into law.

(Q&A)

(Governor, these are Daryl's notes from Marshall Fisher on narcotics agents.)

At approximately \$90,000 per agent my request for a \$5 million increase at the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics would hire 52 agents.

Generally, would need one administration support position for every 10 Agents, which would cost \$320,000 at \$32,000 per position.

Breakdown for agents would be salary and fringe at \$45,000 and equipment (includes vehicle, weapons, vests, computer, etc.) at \$45,000 per agent.

This initiative would result in a 31% increase in positions and a 38% increase in personnel.

Once the agents are trained we should see an arrest increase of approximately 1,000 from an existing yearly average of 3,000-plus. Cases would jump to probably more than 5,000 annually.

MBN would certainly be able to more sufficiently attack the trafficking of prescription pharmaceuticals that has become a serious issue.

Additionally that agency could fully staff every District office in the state, potentially form additional drug teams and target high profile crime areas with existing problems.

For example the Mississippi Delta area needs more attention regarding the criminal impact of expanding Hispanic-based drug organizations; the Gulf coast needs increased attention to growing issues with Asian drug organizations.